

MAIN LINE TIMES

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Traffic among residents' top issues with City Avenue rezoning plans

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For anyone who has taken part in the nearly monthly meetings over the past year on proposed rezoning in the City Avenue corridor, the suggestion that Lower Merion is "rushing forward" to action might seem perverse.

In comments at a meeting April 13 of the township's Building and Planning Committee, however, it was clear the divide between parts of the community over a many-times-revised draft zoning ordinance is still wide.

Hearing continuing concerns from neighborhood groups in Bala Cynwyd and Merion, the committee put off a vote that would have set a date next month for a public hearing and potential adoption of the ordinance.

A vote on that step in the process now will not take place until the May committee meeting, pushing back a hearing date until no earlier than June or possibly July.

The rezoning, which corresponds to changes enacted by Philadelphia almost two years ago on its side of City Avenue, would bring sweeping changes in the density and height of buildings permitted on parcels in Lower Merion's prime commercial corridor.

But it would also promote revitalization of the area, which commercial-property owners say is crucial, in a manner that would encourage mixed use, transit and pedestrian-oriented development to transform today's sprawling office parks into a new live-work-play environment.

Speakers who represent owners of some of the largest commercial-property owners in the corridor underlined the urgency of rezoning again, saying that an area once known as "The Golden Mile" is losing out to newer or updated office developments in Conshohocken or Radnor.

Janet Giuliani of Tishman Speyer Properties, which owns the One, Two and Three Bala office complexes and Saks Fifth Avenue store, cited vacancy rates, compar-

ing change in the locations from 2005 to 2011. City Avenue, whose newest building dates to 1989, has seen its vacancy rate climb from 14 percent to 20 percent. During the same years, Conshohocken's vacancy rate dropped from 22 percent to 16.8 percent, while Radnor, after the departure of major employer Wyeth, went from 36 percent down to 10 percent. Some of the first tenants to move into new facilities in Conshohocken "came straight from City Avenue," Giuliani said.

Following up on her comment, Rich Gottlieb, another member of the board of directors of the City Avenue Special Services District, said, "I don't think the public really cares about leasing rates" and such statistics, but other residents like him should "care about maintaining the value of those properties" as the matter at hand affects tax rates.

On the other hand, however,

residents of neighboring communities said there are major issues of density, traffic conditions on City Avenue and other streets today, and the impacts of new development on congestion still to be resolved.

It was only last month that preliminary findings of a traffic analysis associated with the rezoning were presented at a public workshop. While the study, which may lay the groundwork for impact fees to be imposed on developers, found that new development may add relatively little to traffic growth in the City Avenue corridor, it also found that many intersections are failing now or will fail in the next several years.

Director of Building and Planning Bob Duncan told a reporter after the meeting that estimates of the costs of recommended road improvements won't be available until early next month.

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City Ave. talk continues

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Roger Moog of the Neighborhood Club of Bala Cynwyd told commissioners that a number of members of an advisory committee on the transportation impacts believe that "accompanying this type of ordinance must be a financial plan committing to improvements."

While it's uncertain where funding can be found, "If you don't do this at the same time, you're really putting the cart before the horse," Moog said. "It's not good public policy, and it's more than we can tolerate."

David Haas, also representing the Neighborhood Club, said all the meetings until now have been preparation. "What we've done is set the stage for the real main event," he said, meaning determining the density of future development.

Neighbors have been told repeatedly, Haas reminded, that once the traffic impacts were known, officials would take a new look at the proposed ordinance to decide whether it is appropriate or should be scaled back. "We have done a lot of nibbling around the edges" but haven't gotten to the main issues, Haas said.

There was a specific point of disagreement. Jim Stevenson, representing Federal Realty Investment Trust, owners of the Bala Cynwyd Shopping Center, said it objects to a revision of the ordinance that limits building height on that parcel to 90 feet, down from an original 120.

That "touched a nerve" with neighbor Mary Ammon, who lives on St. Asaph's Road behind the shopping center. She pointed out that 90 feet is an increase over the site's current limit of 65 feet.

"Federal Realty is very greedy," she told Stevenson. "No, you cannot have 120 feet, where people live and there are children. If that is the process, I will hold it up as long as I can."

If anything, concerns over those impacts may be broadening. Commissioners had received copies of a letter to the editor of the *Main Line Times*, signed by more than two dozen residents from throughout the township. It asks the board to consider that rezoning City Avenue may be premature, given the long and ongoing effort to write an update to Lower Merion's 32-year-old Comprehensive Plan.

President Liz Rogan had asked commissioners not to comment and save questions for the next meeting. When Bala Cynwyd Commissioner George Manos responded to remarks about the letter, noting that many of the signers have not participated in meetings and saying he was "disappointed" they were not present that night, it sparked a flurry of controversy.

Leigh Anne Smith of Bryn Mawr, president of the Federation of Civic Associations, went to a microphone to respond. Rogan, who had closed public comment, asked her to sit down, relenting only after loud protest from the audience.

Smith explained that many of the signers had deliberately stayed away when representatives of the Neighborhood Club and Merion Civic Association told them they were working to resolve issues and that the board would delay action.

"We heard that great headway was being made," Smith said. "We wanted to let the most-affected civics speak tonight."

"Please do not misunderstand" that, or concerns about the pace of rezoning, "as people who are misinformed," she asked Manos.

"I appreciate your answer," Manos replied, saying he was surprised by the late objections and wants "to know what to expect."

In a conversation after the meeting, Manos said he and some other board members plan to meet over the next month with the Neighborhood Club and respond to issues that have "not been addressed to their satisfaction."

"We plan to meet individually with any groups that have concerns," he added.